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ABSTRACT

Teachers of writing can be compared to tourists in that they often deal only with the superficial aspects of student writing. Some teachers approach written themes carrying correction symbols as gadgets; others dissect student writing through the use of computer terminals and t-units. Still others view the writer romantically as someone with talent by nature, but who is chained by experience to the teacher's red pencil. The writer, in contrast, is the resident in the writing area, who writes out of a history of experience that includes perceptions, feelings, memories, humor and language. For the teacher to assist students in a meaningful way, she or he must study the composing processes in children, read student papers well, and work with the writer's strengths. In addition, the relationship between teacher and student, both in the prewriting and the writing task, merits close examination. (MAI)

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Tourists, Residents, and the Writer's Credibility

Most Americans have been tourists or have experience with them so the metaphor of the writing teacher as a tourist is instructive and amusing. Until I moved off the farm as a sixteen year old, I thought of tourists as hunters, sightseers, and occasionally as fishers. These tourists were novel and dumb, we thought. Novel because they came in new vehicles and owned guns, cameras, binoculars and most of what is sold in modern sporting-goods stores. We thought they were dumb city-slickers because they never knew where they were going. One would stop along the road and ask, "Hey son, hot out ain't it; can you tell me where Wakely's dam is?" Or another one might lean his head out the window and say, "Hey sonny, where's a good place around here to hunt cottontails or pheasants?" Whether they knew where they were going or not, half of them accelerated engines under simonized hoods and left along the road tracks which might be reminders of city folks until the next rain. I wondered how they found out about Wakely's dam, how many fish they might catch, if they'd come back, and how I'd get to the river to fish if I had to.

Later I met another class of tourists, richer and more novel than the Nebraska hunters, who were after all natives to the county in which they drove along until they found someone of whom to ask directions without embarrassing themselves. I was working in Glacier National Park, north of Browning, Montana about fifty miles. Being summer help, I was a tourist myself, working six days a week and hiking, riding horseback, fishing and singing college-kid songs of the middle sixties the rest of the time. These tourists were much more sophisticated. They captured the mountains, the glaciers, the lakes, fish, and Montana natives with the sophistication only money

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could buy. Camera buffs came with tripods, light meters, lenses handled like babies, and the know-how of a college course. St. Mary's lake winked back each time, and I'd look up the stream now and then as they pointed with camera and then finger. Between the landscape and the tourist came the camera.

Tourists of Glacier National Park always wanted a way to get the most the quickest. One would drive up in a Mercury wagon, let a Pekingese out to pee, check the Airstream and Hondas and ask, "Hi, just came up from Yellowstone; can you tell me a good place to camp?" I was as pleasant as the Nebraska farm boy but not sincere. One after the other would listen half way through my explanation, check his watch, look up at the mountains and walk off convinced the natives were either naive or uncooperative. Occasionally, one would ask when the glacier moved. I'd tell them 6 P.M. if the sun had been hot and 7 P.M. if it had been cool for a day or two.

Too many teachers of writing and their mentors are tourists who look through a variety of strong lenses trying to bring the writer's experience up close. Like my Nebraska hunters and Montana sightseers, these teachers see only what their gadgets allow. Some look out over students and see sentences, topic sentences, paragraphs, transitions, themes, and theses sentences. These carry a set of correction symbols just in case a kind lets her content show. This tourist could just as well stay home where it is safe, where papers are graded by counting errors, and where the teacher's college themes are kept.

Other passers-by of the writer's experience use federal money to buy sophisticated taxonomies. There is a fascination with dissection, the microscopic view. These tourists see phrases, clauses, parallel structures, similes, metaphors, active verbs, carefully chosen objectives, compound-complex sentences, and phrase markers. Believing students should write often, these teachers see the story, the essay, the diary, or the poem as magestic peaks in the writer's experience, to be attempted only

after calisthenics and weeks of paragraphing. Such lenses as these break the writer's experience into parts the teacher can handle.

Even more sophisticated observers count the number of terminal units, rank students accordingly, complain about technical blindness in professional schools, and prove that as a lens the t-unit is both inexpensive and powerful. In a matter of minutes, a student's paper can be analyzed and corrected, without saying anything about the topic, the student's point of view, the student, or the audience. Like other machines, t-unit analyzers are carefully guarded, precise, and consistent. A reliable device, the t-unit will examine the same qualities in all writing and will some day contribute to the nation's gross product.

Yet other tourists look romantically, view the writer as someone who is talented by nature but by experience chained to the teacher's red pencil. "Be creative," he says. "Don't worry about mechanics today," she urges. "Just write something you believe." More tourists to the writer's landscape. They see only the surface, care little in their teaching for what they have either not done well or not done at all because they too have been exploited by gadget makers.

Maybe the best way to put tourists in their place is to give them something to do. Otherwise they stand around in the way, meddle in real work, and generally make a nuisance of themselves. Suppose we describe the writer's experience in five stages: preliterary, prewriting, casting, drafting, and editing. Where does the tourist fit? Where the resident? Clearly, the resident must be doing something, be well on the way, and perform the tasks of her culture. The preliterary and prewriting stages develop the resident's resistance, a kind of antidote against tourists.

More positively, in the preliterary stage the resident allows the tourist to observe. No meddling. No knowledge claims from the tourist about the landscape. Writers have histories out of which they write. We know that. Perceptions, feelings,

laughter, memories, and language come most naturally from those histories. The boy in the earlier picture lived sixteen years on a farm, an experience romanticists who have heard about grass roots would cherish. He lived through the worst of Nebraska winters, remembers the day in the late nineteen forties when men put the first electric wiring in his parents' house, and recalls his mother reading Tom Sawyer to him, as she had no doubt also done for children of the Sioux. He drank whiskey in high school more than he should and cared for his grandfather and grandmother deeply; but never did he have a runt's chance of writing about those things in school. Yet, modern readers of Mike Royko, Richard Wright, Mark Twain, Henry James, and Stephen Judy see those writers' experience surfacing on every page. Everywhere, but most surely in the beginning, the young writer must go on about his business, daily charged with living and building memories. Whether the preliterary stage occurs before writers begin or whether it hangs on all the way through drafting, it belongs to the resident and can only be encouraged and admired by the tourist.

Prewriting, the next stage, is the writer's best defense because enthusiasm, invention, and speculation are set forth as the initiative of the resident. Most of all, it is the time when the resident can manipulate the tourist. No gadgets so far, no thesis sentence, no concocted models, and no myths about topic sentences. Now's the time to write. Roughly, prewriting goes something like the following, although never in the same order. My interest is aroused. Something out of the ordinary strikes me. The idea gets stronger and stronger, subsides a bit and comes back. As I write, I wonder if such a personal view, my language, has any value beyond the moment. Will it last? Although the feelings are sufficiently intense, I wonder if they can be expressed significantly, or will these turn out like so many others, an array of words? Hopes, foolish visions of grandeur and failure come one behind the other. The writing goes on, sometimes methodically, other times feverishly. The final product almost

never resembles its mental image. Emotion comes and goes. Foolishly, I compare myself, not my ideas or words, to others, attempting to sort out a vision worth following. In first thoughts come new enthusiasm, new reasons to write, and hopes of effecting new understanding. More than anything, I believe myself creditable, even superior, confident and rightfully novel. Such arrogance is good support later when, in the face of ignorance, disbelief, and criticism, I must revise. Such is the account of a resident writer, as the writing takes form on paper. Such is the resident's way of helping the tourist understand.

Let the tourist in now, but no gadgets. Let's see how that might go. "Have you written something?" asks the teacher.

"Yes, I am working on something about teenagers and their parents. Is it time to hand them in?" asks the resident.

The tourists sits. "Could I read it?"

"Sure."

Following the reading,more information is needed because the next stage, casting, depends upon the tourist's ability to pass as a resident, which is a very tricky thing if you're not used to the idea. The reader might comment on the ideas she has thought of before or about ideas which are new to her; or she could compare the writer's work favorably to another student's writing, to an essay of her own, or to a published work. Small talk like, "That's a nice paragraph you've got there," and "I'll bet you can't wait to see how it looks when it's completed" is in order. The writer will begin to empathize with the teacher, and the teacher might take advantage of the graciousness of the writer by trying her own hand at a paragraph, writing some part she understands well. After keeping the resident from working for a few minutes, the meddler ought to move on.

Casting is the imposition of form on content. Typically, the resident is the more sophisticated about the landscape, knowing almost every word, sentence, and embedded meaning, but the tourist knows about form and can risk suggestions now that the resident's credibility and integrity have been set during prewriting.

Tourist: "Hi, what are you doing?"

Resident: "Oh, I'm not sure, explaining bad and good uses of propaganda I guess.

Tourist: "I see. Hmm? (Reads the paper)

"It looks like you've put the good uses of propaganda first. That's kind of different, and the tone is a positive one. And the bad uses? Where are they?

Resident: I was going to mix them in, but it didn't work.

In the dialogue, the resident provides information, and the tourist, who is becoming educated, gets a feel for the local culture--not too unlike when students in universities have to figure out that no two professors are quite the same. Boldly, the tourist might suggest a new arrangement by letting the resident use some gadgets, such as t-unit analysis, point of view, student or professional models, a chapter on organization, metaphor, and so on. If the tourist accepts his own unfamiliarity with the landscape, such suggestions aren't meddelings in the rights and wisdom of the writer. The resident is in his own environment adaptive and will often accept the tourist's cast into which to put ideas.

As the writing continues in drafting, the earlier stages--preliterary, prewriting, and casting--continue for a while, but soon the resident becomes more and more methodical and less and less inventive. The tourist looks over the work noticing features upon which to comment almost always in a positive way. "This part hangs together well here, where you take the time to define what you mean by

propaganda. The reader can relax there. Notice the inventive way you avoided getting stuck in arguments about absolutes here. Maybe the tone could be adjusted a bit, say by adding a little humor." That's the way drafting might go.

The final stage, editing, brings out the most natural tendencies of the tourist, for by experience most are editors. Any one of a multitude of quick changes can occur: parallelism added here and the need for it there, the avoidance of linking verbs in one or two places, an exchange a long sentence for the drama and clarity of short ones, maybe even the rearrangement of a paragraph. Beyond that it's mechanics, and the tourist can usually spot these.

I have worked the metaphor hard and maybe omitted features others would add, and some summary remarks about what teachers and their teachers might learn are in order. First of all the obvious: we all must become resident writers in our own voice, and we must accept the diversity among us. Most of what we find in textbooks is gadgetry, useful in its way toward the end of the resident's work, when the writer's credibility has been established, when the teacher knows what to offer and when the resident can both resist and accept outside help. Our education in institutions and our work as teachers are too often technical, distancing us from fuller experiences. We can restore ourselves by writing and by writing with our students. In our own ways, we need to perceive of writing as a process, a public process in which ours is a humble position as we learn the writer's wisdom.

There are finally some interesting ways to leave the metaphor of the teacher of writing as a tourist. Teacher education programs and teachers need to study composing processes in children. We know that. We need to learn to read students' papers well, always working on the writer's strengths. We know that. But if the metaphor works, two unexplored areas need attention. First, we need to learn to

read prewritings and drafts. How do tourists respond to writing in its earliest form, before casting, drafting, and editing? Does anybody respond at that stage? If so, how? Teachers and their teachers tend to read drafts as an editor would, which surely is not entirely appropriate. Let us learn to read a child's or a college freshman's or our own work as educated tourists. Second, let's explore the environments, purposes, and customs under which tourists and residents first meet. Has the resident almost finished a piece of writing before the tourist comes along? That would be best because tourists tend to be pushy. What's the relationship between the two? Does the tourist take out the gadgets and set them up, surrounding the resident and interrupting the work? Or does the tourist sit the resident down, make an assignment and take charge right from the beginning by telling the resident what good ideas expressed well look like? Investigations of the way we read works we hope to improve could bring us closer to the writer, to writing, and to teaching. Teaching writing with the image of the tourist in mind might make better travellers of us all.